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ABSTRACT

The role of communication in the maintenance of healthy long-term family relationships is an important one. Communication exists within the family as a dynamic and essential force in the maintenance of relationships, and facilitates the development of the satisfied and healthy family. Families are governed by rules, making interactions patterned and predictable. Flexibility in these rules is inherently related to the satisfaction of the family. Two general skills are important: the ability to establish workable rules for interaction and the ability to control the communication to reach desired goals. Even sixth-grade students (who were questioned in North Carolina) recognized the importance of family communication, in commenting on when they felt good and bad about their families. Families have changed greatly in the last two decades, and the communication within such families also needs examination. Each contemporary family type (cohabiting couples, nuclear families, single-parent families, blended families, dual-worker families) is presented with unique problems to overcome. Roles within contemporary families are changing: people play a variety of roles and both women and men are expected to play an increasing number of roles in many families. Communicating role expectations is related to family satisfaction. A balance between autonomy and intimacy is important within the family, and the role of communication in finding it is paramount. Supporting, disclosing, negotiating, positively distorting, communicating needs, and demonstrating understanding of other family members are just a few of the communicative behaviors crucial in creating a family which is healthy and happy. Developing and maintaining flexible communication behaviors is one way toward a more fulfilling family life. (Sixty-seven references are attached.) (SR)

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Family Communication and Health:

Maintaining Marital Satisfaction

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> The greatest happiness and the deepest satisfaction in life, the most intense enthusiasm and the most profound inner peace, all come from being a member of a loving family (Wahlroos, 1983).

The role of communication in the maintenance of healthy long-term family relationships is an important one. Although it is not the only, or ultimate, remedy for family health and happiness, it does assist families to that end. Family satisfaction is difficult to achieve in theory or practice. Family life is complex, but as this paper will illustrate, it provides a unique communication setting.

Communication exists within the family as a dynamic and essential force in the maintenance of relationships. While allowing family members to demonstrate understanding and support, establish autonomy, resolve conflict, make decisions and manage power and stress, communication facilitates the development of the satisfied and healthy family. Many authors have given communication strong recommendations. For example, Phillips and Goodall (1983) write:

> Talk is the substance of a loving relationship. Talk enables lovers to exchange feelings and make agreements about their day-to-day life. In this way each couple develops their own unwritten constitutions, agreements about how decisions are made and carried out, how disputes are to be settled, how rituals and ceremonies will be conducted, and how they will deal with each other and everyone else (p.

103).

Family therapists and practitioners often recommend communication to troubled families. Sven Wahlroos, author of Family Communication, is unequivocal: "In my two decades of practice as a clinical psychologist I have become convinced that the key to improvement of family relationships--and thereby to emotional health in general--lies in communication (1983, p. xiii). Therapist and hotline volunteer Jane Taylor explained in an interview that communication makes a healthy family:

> Healthy families "really talk to each other. Not at, over, or around each other. Talking makes you vulnerable, but you've got to take the risk. And the other people in your family have to be willing to listen and hear" (Healy & Peterson, 1987, p. 6D).

Sixth-grade students at Hanes Middle School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, understand the importance of communication as well. They were asked when they felt bad and when they felt good in their families. Not surprisingly, many of their responses focused on communicative behaviors. One student explained: "I feel good when my mom gives me helpful advice. If feel good when a family crisis works out. When my mom appreciates what I do, I look in the mirror and say, 'Boy, am I lucky.'" Another disclosed: "Sometimes we get into arguments, but we always seem to solve them." Yet another revealed: "My mom makes me feel good when she discusses with me about my day-to-day problems." One girl reported that she feels bad when her

family "ignores one another." Sixth-grader Stephanie concluded: "The most fun time is talking about our problems because we can be like detectives and solve them" (USA Today, April 13, 1987, p. 6D).

Hess and Handel (1959) state that families come to have a shared social reality that is comprised of a myriad of images that fit together. If the collection of images held by the family do not intermesh, the family relationships are unlikely to be compatible. They write that the purpose of communication is to create "a satisfactory congruence of individual and family images through the exchange of suitable testimony" (p. 6). This interpretive approach places communication in a central position in the development of satisfying family relationships.

Pearson (1989) suggests family members may report higher levels of satisfaction to the extent that (1) they perceive the communication behavior of other with the family favorably, (2) they interact with each other, (3) they are able to demonstrate their understanding of others, (4) they are able to provide supportive and positive comments to each other, (5) they are able to resolve differences, reach consensus, and minimize conflict, and (6) they demonstrate flexibility. Enacting such behaviors is often complex. The rules a family develops and maintains are an important part in regulating the these behaviors.

Rules and Family Interaction

The general idea of rules within the family is crucial in understanding and achieving healthy family interactions. Galvin

and Brommel (1986) define family rules as "relationship agreements that prescribe and limit a family's behavior over time (p. 51). Jackson (1965) defines family rules as metaphors "coined by the observer to cover the redundancy he(she) observes" (p. 11). Because families are governed by rules, their interaction is patterned and predictable. Rules, essentially, are important for relational development; family members come to share common rules about their communicative behavior (e.g., Middleberg & Gross, 1979). The development of rules also encourage family satisfaction; they allow the family a way to gain a sense of shared reality and to understand each other--to coordinate meaning (e.g. Cronen, Pearce, & Snavely, 1979; Pearce, 1976).

Rules created within the family are negotiated. Flexibility in these rules is inherently related to the satisfaction of the family. Families that are highly restrictive and inflexible in their rules tend to be dysfunctional, while families that are less predictable and more adaptive in their interactions tend to be functional (e.g., Gottman, 1979). Satisfied family members may be more sensitive and responsive to the changes occurring within the family. They may allow children to interact differently as they grow and develop.

Montgomery (1981) encourages family members to be aware of their interaction patterns. She writes that the family should control their communication rather than allow their communication to control them. She states that two general skills are

important: the ability to establish workable rules for interaction and the ability to control the communication to reach desired goals. She suggests metacommunication, communication awareness, and communication regulation as methods of gaining higher-quality interaction within the family unit.

The Contemporary American Family

Families have changed in geometric proportions in the last two decades. Because of changing times, and changing expectations, definitions of families need to be continually examined and adjusted. Jane Howard, author of Families (1978) writes,

> They're saying that families are dying, and soon. They're saying it loud, but we'll see that they're wrong. Families aren't dying. The trouble we take to arrange ourselves in some semblance or other of families is one of the most imperishable habits of the human race. What families are doing, in flamboyant and dumbfounding ways, is changing their size and their shape and their purpose...which are often so noisy that the clamor resulting is easily mistaken for a death rattle (p. 13).

The differing configurations of contemporary families require that we adopt a broader definition than some offered in the past. A contemporary definition needs to consider not only traditional family structures, but non-traditional ones, too. Realizing the evolution of new family types, the communication within such family types also needs examination, which a variety

of researches have necessarily done.

The changing nature of the family poses new challenges for the individual seeking health, happiness, and satisfying family relationships. Satisfaction in all family types may well depend upon the ability of its members to communicate with each other and their ability to interact effectively and appropriately. Each contemporary family type is presented with unique problems and situations to be overcome in order for a healthy family relationship to be created and maintained.

Cohabiting Couples A unique communication situation is created between two unrelated and unmarried adults of the opposite sex who decide to share living quarters. Such a situation, cohabitation, has become more prevalent and more openly practiced by Americans in recent times (e.g., Gwartney-Gibbs, 1986). The humorist Gerald Nachman observed: "Marriage could catch on again because living together is not quite living and not quite together. Premarital sex slowly evolves into premarital sox." Although his comments are witty, they are not accurate.

The number of cohabiting couples is steadily and dramatically increasing, presenting a unique communication situation. Research by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) has two important implications to consider: (1) Individuals who experience relational satisfaction in the cohabiting setting may or may not experience such satisfaction in the marital setting, and (2) Communication patterns for the cohabitation setting and

for the marital setting may be distinctive. De Maris and Leslie (1984) validate this. They report that after a year of marriage, married women who had cohabited perceived a lower quality of communication than they had during cohabitation and both married women and married men perceived less relational satisfaction than when they had cohabited.

Cohabitors may not really be experiencing a "trial" marriage as many suggest. The cultural demands and the role expectations placed on married couples far outweigh the relational rules that the cohabiting couple has established. Although a couple may feel that they are creating lifetime relational patterns during cohabitation, they may find these patterns are dramatically altered when they marry. Cohabitation may have its own unique set of characteristics, and the communication patterns that occur between and among cohabitors may not be generalizable to other family types.

Nuclear Families An increase in cohabitors is paralleled by a sharp decrease in conventionally "nuclear" families: families which consist of breadwinning fathers, homemaking mothers, and resident children, (Boswell, 1981). Some nuclear families do still exist, however, and the communication about and within such families is important to consider.

The nuclear family striving to establish long-term and satisfying relationships is often faced with external pressure from friends and other family members. Others might communicate that the family is out of date, that the couple hold

ultraconservative values, that the wife is incapable of working, or that the husband is tyrannical. All of these factors create pressures which demand open, honest, and strong patterns of communication within the family, in order for such potential conflicts to be resolved.

Single-Parent Families The rising divorce rate contributes to a greater number of single-parent families: a family-type which is faced with a number of unique communication situations. Although women head the majority of single-parent families, both men and women face difficulties in such situations. Weiss (1979) suggests three areas of potential problems: (1) responsibility overload, (2) task overload, and (3) emotional overload. Although it has been evidenced by number of researchers that children are not necessarily negatively affected by single parenthood (e.g. Cantor & Drake, 1983; Coleman, Ganong, & Ellis, 1985), its effects on parents can be devastating. It clearly changes the communication patterns that exist in the family.

If the single-parent household has occurred as a result of a death, dissolution, or divorce, the absence of one family member creates shifts and changes in the interaction behavior of the remaining members. Such changes might cause, or on the converse, relieve tension. New communication patterns between the noncustodial parent and the custodial parent that involve children might also result. Children might be used to communicate messages between their parents. Anger, jealousy, and other negative emotions intended for the other parent might be

communicated to the child. Shifts in roles and loss of external networks are yet other concerns faced by the single-parent family.

The success of failure of the single-parent family probably rests on the level of flexibility in the family. When the custodial parent is inflexible, he or she is likely to suffer greater loss and be less able to help create a new, functioning, and healthy family. Changing roles, adapting communication patterns, and generally shifting one's conception of the family unit are essential.

Blended Families The blended family, consisting of two adults and step, adoptive, or foster children, encounters yet different problems and situations. Although it may resemble the nuclear family, it is distinctive from it. Wald (1981) argues that the blended family experiences three stages of development that the nuclear family does not: (1) dissolution of the original nuclear family, (2) reorganization as a single-parent family, and (3) reconstitution as a remarried family.

The process of blending more than one family is difficult. Similarly, establishing effective and appropriate communication patterns is arduous. In the nuclear family, communication patterns are established with family members, beginning with the marital couple and including children as they are born or adopted. In the blended family, communication patterns have already been established among a group of people or among several groups of people.

The blended family raises unique problems for individuals who desire effective and appropriate communication patterns. In many ways the blended family is like a Rubik's cube. Alterations on one side of the cube, like changes in one blended family, change the makeup of related blended, single-parent, and childless-couple families. The multiple connections, the different expectations, and the varying past experiences of each of the members demands the development and maintenance of positive patterns of communication.

Dual-Worker Families With radical shifts in the working patterns of American families (e.g. Tangri & Jenkins, 1986), the dual-worker family has become more common. The new marital arrangements that include two working partners may be divided into conventional dual-worker marriages, unconventional dual-worker marriages, and dual-career marriages. Each of these is faced with unique and often complex communication situations.

Conventional dual-worker families. Conventional dual-worker families have not been widely studied, although they can be distinguished in a number of ways. First, their standard of living does not allow services such as day care, housekeeping, or extended baby-sitting. Second, their social class does not provide support for such choices. Third, their own attitudes do not include the wife in the breadwinning role. Dual-worker couples are primarily from blue-collar or middle-income families.

Because of such characteristics, unique communication situations and challenges are encountered. The dual-worker

couples themselves do not accept new sex roles that allow the husband to share in housekeeping and child-rearing tasks. Yogev (1987), however, found that traditional sex-roles regarding the spouse are closely related to marital satisfaction. Regardless, the couples often diminish the wife's financial contribution to the family unit. Instead, her salary is viewed as "helping out." In this way, the dual-worker couple denies the alteration in their lifestyle and continues to behave as though they are in a nuclear family with a breadwinning father and a homemaking mother. "Denial" is viewed as a classic stage in family crisis (e.g. Mederer & Hill, 1983).

The stress in the conventional dual-worker family is obvious. Two people are attempting to do the work of three with little external or internal support. In addition, the couple often denies the reality of their situation. Finally, the children in such families may receive inadequate care and insufficient time communicating and interacting with other members of their family. An unhealthy and unhappy family is often the result.

Dual-career marriages. Dual-career marriages include a husband and wife who are both committed to their careers and to their families. Different from conventional dual-worker families, the husband and wife in a dual-career family perceive each other more equally as wage-earners and caretakers. Dual-career marriages are increasing at the rate of 7 percent per year (Rice, 1979). As young women continue their education and enter

professional fields, recent figures are probably even higher. Dual-career marriages are an emerging marital choice that can be made more satisfying.

Research on the relationship between satisfying dual-career marriages and communication has begun (e.g. Heacock & Spicer, 1986; Krueger, 1985, 1986; Rosenfeld & Welsh, 1985; Spicer, 1986; Wood, 1986), although in general we know little about the interaction patterns of dual career couples (Bochner, 1976; Heacock & Spicer, 1986). We do know that individuals who choose the dual-career marriage are different from those who choose more traditional marital forms.

Working women tend to be less traditional in their philosophical beliefs, whereas nonworking women tend to be more stereotypically feminine (Deutsch, 1978). Women who work outside the home see themselves as more aggressive, ambitious, and intelligent than do women who are homemakers. The husbands in dual-career marriages are similarly less traditional in philosophical orientation and behavior (Deutsch, 1978).

Dual-career marriages are distinct from traditional marriages, but not in as many ways as one might speculate. For instance, sex roles are not discrepant in the dual-career marriage. Sex roles are not discrete in traditional marriages, and sex-role blur does not always occur in the dual-career marriage to the extent that might be suggested. The sanctified sex-role division of work and power continues to dominate. However, dual-career marriages challenge traditional stereotypes

and power conflicts are common occurrences (Rice, 1979).

Marital instability distinguishes the dual-career marriages from a conventional marriage. Bird (1979) suggests that for every $1,000 increase in a wife's salary, the possibility that she will divorce increases by 2 percent. The stability of a marriage, however, cannot be equated with the marital satisfaction.

The dual-career couple may be able to enhance their relationship through communication. Rapoport and Rapoport (1971) suggest the couple must deal with five dilemmas in their attempts to maintain their relationship. These include dilemmas that occur from differences between social norms and personal norms, dilemmas concerning their identity and self-esteem, dilemmas associated with the social environment and other relationships, dilemmas concerning the choices and demands at various life stages, and dilemmas relating to the overload of handling both work and family duties. These dilemmas may be resolved through thoughtful and caring interaction.

Wood (1986) also recommends communication for dual-career relational maintenance. She explains, "Maintenance of a relationship entails unique communication responsibilities for dual-career spouses because of the lack of an externally supplied structure for the dual career family the consequent necessity to generate a viable structure internally" (p. 267).

Roles within the Family

The contemporary American family, as illustrated, cannot be

characterized easily. In the past when a majority of American families were traditionally nuclear, roles within the family were clear. The television series "Leave it to Beaver" and "Father Knows Best" provided us with unmistakable models. The women in early television programs were home-makers and their husbands were breadwinners. Today, people play a variety of roles and their biological sex is less predictive of their roles.

Roles are an important consideration when seeking healthy long-term family relationships. First, roles within our contemporary society and within the developmental stages of the family are changing. Within one generation, the majority of women have moved from the home to the work place. We have no clear direction about what the next generation will bring. Second, both women and men are expected to play an increasing number of roles in many current families. Both may be expected to be wage-earners, loving marital partners, nurturing parents, household workers, and civic-minded community members. These multiple role demands may result in stress that can be alleviated through communication.

Communicating role expectations is related to family satisfaction. The roles family members play will and the accompanying expectations that these roles hold must be determined within families. Couples must consider if they wish to play traditional or newly evolving roles and must come to some level of agreement. Moreover, they must continue to discuss their changing roles as the family moves through both predictable

and unpredictable changes. Couples must also have some procedure of allocating roles, of determining role accountability, of achieving role congruence, and of gaining a goodness of fit between role expectations and role performance. Nye and McLaughlin (1982) have shown, in general, that when partners are competent in carrying out their roles, family satisfaction is increased.

The roles expected, negotiated, allocated, and ultimately played by family members are affected by differing needs. Particularly important in the family context is the need for autonomy and intimacy. Although the relationships between the two have not been fully determined, we do know that individuals have need for both.

Autonomy and Intimacy within the Family

Family members negotiate autonomy and intimacy. Communicative rules are created that allow certain levels of autonomy and intimacy for each individual and each subgroup within the family. Although no standard for how much autonomy or intimacy is appropriate in a family, some balance is found to be desirable.

Olson (1976) presents a model of family functioning that incorporates three aspects of behavior: cohesion, adaptability, and communication. The dimension of cohesion is similar to the autonomy-intimacy continuum. Olson and McCubbin (1983) define family cohesion as the "emotional bonding that family members have toward one another" (p. 48). They identify four levels of

cohesion: the disengaged family with very low levels of bonding, the separated family with low to moderate levels, the connected family with moderate to high levels, and the enmeshed family with very high levels. Olson and McCubbin hypothesize that satisfied families probably fall within the two mid-levels of cohesion (separated or connected). This theoretical work and its empirical validation (e.g., Olson & Craddock, 1980; Olson & McCubbin, 1982; Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979) support the importance of balance on the continuum of autonomy and intimacy.

As the experts suggest, the role of communication in establishing autonomy and intimacy, and essentially creating a satisfying relationship is paramount. Couples surveyed by USA Today (April 13, 1987, p.4D) identified those factors most important to maintaining a good relationship. Among the most important factors were honesty (96 percent of those polled), discussing feelings (95 percent), sharing financial goals (65 percent), sharing religious values (52 percent), and sharing career goals (42 percent). These behaviors are related to talking to family members and to providing self-disclosure, which allow the achievement of autonomy and intimacy. Such behaviors also encourage long-term, healthy and satisfied families.

Communication and the Healthy, Happy Family

Communication, in and of itself, is related to satisfying relationships. Relationships exist primarily in the communication that occurs between partners (Noller & Guthrie, 1989). Couples who talk to each other tend to be more satisfied

than couples who do not (e.g. Cole, 1985; Holman & Brock, 1986; Pearson, 1991; Worthington, Buston, & Hammonds, 1989). Open and interactive communication affects the quality of the marital relationship (Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Birchler & Webb, 1977; Boyd & Roach, 1977; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Navran, 1967). Health is also reported as an ingredient in a long and happy marriage (Fitzgerald, McKeller, Lener, & Copans, 1985). Overall, marital satisfaction is highly related to the couple's ability to discuss problems effectively and to share their feelings (Snyder, 1979; Zietlow & Sillars, 1988).

Disclosing feelings, however, may not always insure relational satisfaction and growth. For example Gilbert and Horenstein (1975) write that "the communication of intimacies is a behavior which has positive effects only in limited, appropriate circumstances..." Other researchers similarly recommend selective disclosure (Ridley, Jorgensen, Morgan, & Avery, 1982; Schumm, Barnes, Bollman, Jurich, and Bugaighis, 1986; Sillars, Weisberg, Burgraf, & Wilson, 1987).

Some research suggests a couple's perceptions of disclosure may be more important than the amount of disclosure in which they engage. A couple's tendency to positively distort the amount of disclosure received, in an apparent attempt to eliminate distress from their relationships (Beach & Arias, 1983; Davidson, Balswick & Halverson, 1983). These authors hint that positive distortion may be a healthy and useful aspect of a well functioning marriage.

Positive distortion has been identified in other recent research as one ingredient in long-term, happy relationships. Pearson (1991) identifies a number of characteristics of long-term, happy couples including positive distortion of the relationship, lowered expectations, stubbornness, unconditional acceptance, coping with conflict, and being sexually satisfied. In each of these instances, communication is essential in leading to the potential satisfied familial and spousal relationship.

Communicating understanding and support for other family members are behaviors found important creating satisfaction. In general, satisfied family members provide more positive, supportive and agreement statements. Satisfied couples provide fewer negative comments than dissatisfied couples do (Gottman, 1979; Grigg, Fletcher, & Fitness, 1989; Noller, 1982b, 1985; Pike & Sillars, 1985). Satisfied couples are more likely to reinforce each other positively, and to confirm each other (Montgomery, 1981; Weatherford, 1986). In general, the communication behavior of satisfied couples is marked by fewer negative comments, more agreement statements, more approval, and more confirmation compared to dissatisfied couples. Happy couples do engage in conflict, but they tend to be more successful at handling differences (Vincent, Friedman, Nugent & Messerly, 1979) and use more effective complaint strategies (Alberts, 1989).

Summary

Supporting, disclosing, negotiating, positively distorting, communicating needs, and demonstrating understanding of other

family members are just a few of the communicative behaviors crucial in creating a family which is healthy and happy. As illustrated, communication is an important ingredient. Families can learn to improve their communicative behaviors--their ability to demonstrate understanding and support, among others--in a number of ways.

In addition to the suggestions mentioned previously, families can be careful to (1) take time to communicate, (2) listen fully to what another member has to say, (3) provide messages which convey understanding, (4) accept other family members as they see themselves, (5) show their support for others, and (6) avoid negative behaviors. Enacting such behaviors, which ultimately means developing and maintaining flexible communication behaviors, is one way, although not the only way, toward a more fulfilling and healthy family life. Families can bring "the greatest happiness and the deepest satisfaction in life...." (Wahlroos, 1983). With positive and flexible communication patterns, such rewards are more likely.

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